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ABSTRACT

Piagetian-type, indepth interviews were used to explore children's thinking at various ages about the process of reading, thereby gaining insights related to cognitive development across the developmental age span. Interview questions and follow-up probes were designed to elicit responses in three categories: definitions and purposes of reading, processes and strategies involved in reading, and student evaluation of reading. The subjects were ten 4- to 6-year-old children, ten 10- to 12-year-old children, and ten 16- to 18-year-old students. The ages were selected because they represent the highest empirical correlation between age and cognitive stage. The results revealed three stages of children's metalinguistic awareness: (1) Stage I subjects emphasized the physical, observable behaviors of reading; (2) Stage II subjects described the variety of readers' purposes and motivations for reading and also emphasized mental and social strategies aimed at getting meaning; and (3) Stage III subjects described a wide variety of reading and thinking strategies, with a marked emphasis upon the decision-making power of the reader about the author's meaning. (Extensive Excerpts from the interviews are included). (FL)

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DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF METALINGUISTIC AWARENESS RELATED TO READING

by

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Children's awareness of various facets of written and spoken language has been investigated by a growing number of researchers during recent years. The work of Downing and Oliver, 1973-74; Holden and MacGinitie, 1972; Huffman, 1978; Johns, 1977; Kingston, Weaver and Figa, 1971; McNinch, 1978 and Meltzer and Herse, 1969 concerning awareness of aural and written word boundaries has contributed to this body of research. Downing's (1970) earlier work, along with that of Reid (1966), and Johns (1976), provided new insight about the view children held concerning the reading process.

The thrust of the research presented here is somewhat different. This investigation represents one part of a three part interdisciplinary research project concerning children's and teacher's metalinguistic awareness of oral and written communication. Piagetian type, in-depth interviews were developed to explore children's thinking at various ages about the process of written and oral communication so that further insights related to cognitive development across the developmental age

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span could be gained. Our intent was to closely study a relatively small number of extensive interviews with children of rather distinct age groups in an effort to gain a more holistic picture of the understanding of children related to these processes.

STAGES - The term "stage" or "stages" as used in this paper is characterized by inclusion of the following elements in the definition:

- 1) A general mode of thinking appears to be present. Similar, holistic approaches and understandings are found which seem to be common to the group.
- 2) A sequential ordering appears to occur in that the information gained from earlier levels is preserved, but it is incorporated into larger, more complex understandings.

INSTRUMENT

The interview to assess children's thinking related to written communication was developed through several early rounds of pilot testing and refined to the format used to collect the data reported here. Interview questions with follow-up probes were designed to elicit responses around three categories: 1) definitions and purposes of reading, 2) processes and strategies involved when reading and 3) evaluation of reading. All of the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed for analysis and read independently by each author.

SUBJECTS

Interviews were conducted with 10 subjects at ages 4-6, 10 subjects at ages 10-12 and 10 subjects at ages 16-18. These ages were selected because they represent the highest empirical correlation between age and cognitive stage (Green, 1978).

RESULTS

A probable sequence of achievements in the development of children's metalinguistic awareness of reading was suggested by the data. The sequence appears to be stage-like in that 1) similar-aged children tend to think about reading in very similar ways, and 2) older children tend to conceive of reading in more complex ways which may diminish the relevance of earlier conceptions. Three levels of metalinguistic awareness appear to emerge. Several of the most significant characteristics of each level will be described. Although the questions on the interview were organized around the categories mentioned above, subjects' responses were more inter-related and thus a more holistic approach will be taken in discussing the findings.

STAGE I

Children at this level talked about reading and reading strategies as physical and operational activities. To them, reading was "learning words," "looking at words," "practice on words," and "learning how to say words." Reading is associated with the physical behaviors which accompany it. In response to the questions, "What do people do when they read?" physical, mechanical activities such as "they look at the book," "they use their eyes," "they look at the words," or "they turn the pages" were typical replies. External expectations, perhaps learned in a pre-school or school environment were mentioned. People "listen very carefully" and "really pay attention" when they read, according to these youngsters. Children of this level also tend to think of reading as being its visible parts, including letters, words and books. The following exchanges are representative:

WELL, WHAT IS READING, ANYWAY? 5 year old: See you just read the letters together. SO THEN WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE LETTERS GET TOGETHER?

5 year old: Then they say a word. WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY READ?

5 year old: You just get a book and sound the words out.

For young children, the assumption that meaning lies within the words seems apparent. Reading the words seems to allow one to automatically know what they mean. WHY DO YOU READ? 5 year old: So I know what it says. CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT THAT? 5 year old: OK, so I read it. WHY DO YOU WANT TO READ IT? 5 year old: So I'll know what the words say.

WHY DO PEOPLE READ? 5 year old: They read books to learn to do what the words do.

WHAT DOES READING MEAN WHEN YOU ARE READING A BOOK? 5 year old: You have to just look what the word says and sound it out. If you sound the words, sound it all together.

These typical responses seem to indicate that the point of reading for youngsters at this level is to see what something says, as if the reading content is quite self-evident.

A similar theme became apparent when young children talked about the strategies they use to make sense or understand what they read. For these youngsters, being able to read the words or the passage correctly is the same as comprehending and making sense out of what is read. Level I subjects believe that the book will make sense if one reads correctly, that is, reading the way it is written in the book. In response to the question, "What does 'making sense' mean?" a typical reply was "Read it

right, like it says." Similarly, materials are easy to read if "they don't have such hard words" or "because I just learned it in school and just listened to my mother read it and I try to sound it out, sound out the words like my mother did."

WHAT THINGS ABOUT READING ARE HARD FOR YOU? 5 year old: Big words.

When asked what they do when they come to parts they don't know, frequent responses were "sound it out," ask teachers or parents to tell them the word and a few said they would skip the word. Again, being able to read or "know" the words appears to be synonymous with understanding the meaning for these young people. Understanding what something means was equated with being able to "know all the words" and read the passage correctly.

STAGE II: 10-12 years

In contrast to children at younger ages, subjects in the Stage II group indicate awareness of an expanded role of the reader. Children in this group emphasized the reader's own purposes and intentions when reading, recognizing that people read for various reasons. Definitions depended on the reader's motives and the material which was being read.

WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY READ? 10 year old: They're relaxing, imagining things happening in their minds if they're enjoying the book. If they're not enjoying the book, they may just be stumbling over it - reading words and not understanding it.

WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY READ? 12 year old: They read for pleasure or they read to learn something . . . part of both, depending

on what they are reading. TO YOU, WHAT IS READING? 12 year old: It depends on whatever you are reading. The role of the reader is seen to change depending on the purpose of the reader and the kind of material being read.

Another change noted at this level was that readers are no longer asking others to help them with "words." Rather, if assistance is required, subjects are aware they need help in gaining understanding of the meaning of the passage. The following examples illustrate this broadened awareness:

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU COME TO A PART YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND? 10 year old: I go ask people what it means. IS THAT WHAT A GOOD READER DOES? 10 year old: Yes, because they want to find out what it means.

WHEN YOU ARE HAVING TROUBLE WITH READING, DO YOU ASK ANYONE TO HELP YOU? (WHAT DOES _____ DO TO HELP YOU?) 10 year old: My mother explains to me what the word means . . . The teacher helps make it easier to understand.

WHEN YOU'RE AT SCHOOL AND YOU HAVE TROUBLE WITH READING, DO YOU ASK ANYONE TO HELP YOU? 12 year old: Yeah, if I don't understand it. WHO DO YOU ASK? 12 year old: One of my friends. WHAT DO THEY DO TO HELP YOU? 12 year old: They can explain it. The implication in these typical responses seems to be that the reader is aware of the need to know much more than being able to read "the words" as was the case with the Stage I subjects. Rather, subjects at this level indicate readers need to understand, to get the meaning of the text, not to simply be able to know or say the words.

Readers are also seen as having greater control over the text in that they must do more than say or pronounce the words; readers must be able to understand the message of the author. Understanding is not so much a function of the words, but rather is to be found in phrases, sentences and

and the larger context of the reading activity. This theme is also reflected in readers' strategies for "making sense" and understanding the text. Children at this level are aware that a reader's focus is more on getting the meaning than it is on getting "the words." Getting the meaning requires that the semantic and syntactic elements in the text flow together for the reader. The reader's prediction, based on what has come before and what he knows about the subject prior to reading, also comes into play. Note the emphasis upon prediction, things "sounding right" and making sense in the following excerpts:

HOW DO YOU FIGURE OUT WHAT SOMETHING MEANS WHEN YOU READ IT? 10 year old: You kinda look back and see what has happened and you think, well that might happen.

WHAT THINGS ABOUT READING ARE HARD FOR YOU? 12 year old: Picking out long words and reading to where it sounds right . . . You can read the words but if you don't put them in the right space and all, it just doesn't turn out right . . . When you don't read it right, it doesn't make sense to you.

WHAT IF SOMETHING DOESN'T MAKE SENSE? HOW CAN YOU TELL IF IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE? 10 year old: Well, it just wouldn't blend in with all the other words; it just wouldn't sound right.

WHEN YOU ARE READING AND YOU COME TO SOMETHING YOU DON'T KNOW, WHAT DO YOU DO? 10 year old: I read over it and over it and think about it. Usually I get it . . . I read all around the confusing part . . . Usually the next sentence explains it more. WHEN YOU READ, DOES WHAT YOU READ HAVE TO MAKE SENSE TO YOU? 10 year old: Yes, cause what comes

next has to make sense to me. If I don't understand what a part means then I might not understand what comes next.

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF SOMETHING DOESN'T MAKE SENSE? 10 year old:

It doesn't say any thing. It's mixed up. The implication in these examples seems to be that the reader has become increasingly aware of the importance of the syntactical and semantical arrangements of the text. Understanding and making sense of the text is dependent on the discourse "sounding right" and blending together for the reader.

STAGE III - Ages 16-18

At this stage, an increased awareness of an even greater role of the reader than that shown at either of the other two stages is evident. Subjects expanded on the purposes and motives of readers in describing readers' roles with a great variety of printed material. Subjects at this stage are increasingly aware that readers assume a wide variety of roles in interacting with the text, depending on the reader's purpose and the material being read. Readers read to "know how things work" and to "find out what is going on." Reading is also done for pleasure and relaxation.

16 year old: Some people read because they have to . . . for subjects, but lots of people read because they want to.

17 year old: Sometimes I read to seek more knowledge and sometimes, I read just to read. It mentally calms me down.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU READ? 16 year old: Well it's really kind of a relaxed feeling . . . you're mostly relaxed but your mind is really being worked a lot. The ability to draw upon one's background of experience,

both first-hand and vicarious, and use that to contrast, compare and thus to analyze reading content appears to be manifested in Stage III subjects. Readers sometimes create mental pictures of the events in the text. They interact with the text by fantacizing and imagining how it would be to be like the characters in the story. In addition, they contrast and compare their experiences with the information given in the material being read . . .

WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY READ? 16 year old: Well I think most of them try to imagine what it would be like being in their place . . . I try to put myself in their shoes, if I was in their place. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT WHEN YOU READ? I think about the persons in the story and if I would like to be like them.

DO YOU EVER DISAGREE WITH SOMETHING THAT YOU READ? 16 year old: Oh, yes, occasionally I will . . . It would be something like nuclear power, like they say, some people think that nuclear power is dangerous and we shouldn't have it at all. I disagree with that because I believe that we should. HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOU DISAGREE? 16 year old: If I'm really into it, I'll reanalyze it and go back over it and see if I agree or not. I kind of remember things that have happened corresponding to that. And that way I can tell if I disagree with it or not . . . Like my dad working for nuclear power plants and stuff like that, coming in and saying that that's not right; It's stuff that he has said and other people, more authorities, and other information from reliable sources.

Stage III subjects are aware that authors can describe the feelings of the characters and that various emotions can be experienced by readers

depending on the text being read.

WHY DO YOU READ? 17 year old: Because I enjoy reading about other people and about how they feel about subjects.

DO SOME PEOPLE READ SOME THINGS DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHER THINGS? 16 year old: Well, they could read a horror story or something like that and they can get into it where they would be all tense and almost frightened. And then they can turn around and read a comedy or something and just change the whole thing, you know, the whole thing about the body changes. You feel good and relaxed.

In addition to increased sensitivity concerning the purposes of readers and its relation to printed materials, a more global view of the underlying purpose for reading emerges. The point of reading is seen in the broadest perspective: that of communication.

WHAT DO YOU THINK READING IS? 16 year old: It's just a form of communication. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY COMMUNICATION? 16 year old: Well it's one person giving his ideas to another person by writing them down and other people reading it. It's like talking to somebody, but it's there for everybody.

At this advanced level, an awareness of the reader as a decision-maker strongly emerges. Readers are seen to interact with the text by making decisions about what they consider important to the understanding of the text. Strategies are used to determine the contextual importance of an unknown word, phrase or section. Only if the meaning of the unknown part is judged as critical to understanding the text by the reader, are subsequent strategies used to determine the meaning. Readers are seen as decision-makers who decide what is important to them about comprehension of the text.

WHEN YOU ARE READING AND YOU COME TO SOMETHING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW,
WHAT DO YOU DO? HOW DO YOU FIGURE IT OUT? 16 year old: First skip it
and if it doesn't mean much, it isn't important.

WHEN YOU ARE READING AND YOU COME TO SOME THING THAT YOU DON'T KNOW,
WHAT DO YOU DO? 17 year old: Well, if I think it is an important word
in the book I need to know what it means, I go and look it up. But lots
of times, I just skip on over it.

Another important awareness that appeared to emerge with Stage III
subjects was their understanding that reading materials can be interpreted
differently by different people. Because of the variety in the background
experiences of the readers, the meanings they find in texts will differ.
Subjects recognized that a portion of a text may have many interpretations,
depending on the readers.

DO YOU THINK SOME PEOPLE READ SOME THINGS DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHERS?
17 years old: Definitely. Some people can read a poem and interpret it
in many different ways compared to what I can. Given a poem, ten people
would probably not interpret that poem the same way.

DO YOU THINK SOME PEOPLE READ SOME THINGS DIFFERENTLY THAN OTHERS?
16 year old: Well, lots of people, they think they read a sentence and
then they think of it in a different way than what you do.

CONCLUSION

In conclusions, the following insights are offered related to students' metalinguistic awareness concerning reading. Stage I subjects emphasized the physical, observable behaviors of reading; Stage II subjects described the variety of readers' purposes and motivation for reading. They also emphasized mental and social strategies aimed at getting meaning, clearly aware that more is involved than simply reading words; State III subjects described a wide variety of reading and thinking strategies, with a marked emphasis upon the decision - making power of the reader relative to what meaning the reader eventually chooses to consider as intended, appropriate and important. The developmental pattern we have reported here indicates that children first tend to emphasize the correct physical behaviors, then to engage in thinking and interacting with others to be sure one has understood what the author meant, and finally to involve themselves in making decisions about what is important to them in comparing intended meaning to their own selected or created meanings.

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